

Peter Fröberg Idling. *Song for an approaching storm: a fantasy*. Translated from the Swedish by Peter Graves (Pushkin Press: London)

Swedish writer Peter Fröberg Idling calls his novel about the political and cultural machinations of 1950s Cambodia a ‘fantasy’. He does so, perhaps, to make clear that he is not writing, nor attempting to write, a work of history. In conception and on the page, *Song for an approaching storm* is quite an odd book, but in a good way: in the novel’s best moments, it soars because of its oddness

The novel is split into three entwined parts, with each part focusing on the lives of a key character. In Part I, a young would-be revolutionary called Sar juggles his political aspirations, some open but some hidden, with his love for, and commitment to, his fiancé, Somaly. In Part 2, a senior politician called Sary makes Machiavellian waves at election time, while wooing the much younger Somaly. Part 3 focuses on Somaly, a young woman from the elite ruling class who, amongst other matters, reflects on ‘the role that tradition had allotted her in the life she was expected to lead’ (243).

Idling’s portrait of Sar is the book’s high point. Sar is a fictionalised version of the man who later became known as Pol Pot, the long-time leader of the Khmer Rouge. The Pol Pot period in Cambodia (1975-79) was one of the most criminally brutal of the twentieth century, and in term was a key period in a decades-long era of war and bloodshed in Cambodia and the Indochina region.

The dichotomy of Sar’s life is set in the novel’s opening pages: he reminisces about a fine dinner with Somaly before he drives to meeting place and exchanges passwords with a cyclo driver, who takes him to a secret meeting. He is forever alive to the possibility of being caught: ‘Tuck your handkerchief down into the breast pocket of your jacket so it won’t offer a white target for a marksman to aim at’ (13). Idling’s second person narration in Part 1 draws the readers towards Sar, inviting an unlikely empathy. Sar is deceptively laconic: there is a great deal going on behind his carefully constructed façade. At times, he is compassionate — scarily and confusingly so for the historically aware reader. At other times, his single-mindedness is chilling, although, again, the power of the historical figure-in-waiting contributes to the potency of such moments.

Parts II and III of the novel, focusing on Sary and Somaly respectively, pale a little in comparison to Part I. In fairness to Idling, this is inevitable because the shadow of the future Pol Pot hangs over the story like a malignant shadow, even when he is not the novel’s central focus. Sary is a study of power and of privilege (he likes his fine French wine). He craves a more sophisticated Cambodia, even though he himself strains for sophistication. The portrait is fascinating, although at times there is something slightly forced in the depiction of his authority.

Somaly, a beauty queen with a bristling intelligence, invests much time in pondering her own future as well as that of the country. She must decide whether to marry Sar and so to risk losing her inheritance. But this decision is just a small element of her thinking: her ideas and dreams evolve and expand, often framed around issues of gender and societal constraints. At one point — in a passage Idling handles beautifully — Somaly reflects on the ‘small minority of people who understand what is beautiful and the great majority who do not’ (259), going on to meditate on the need to peel away layers before the true beauty of an object can be revealed.

Idling handles particularly well Somaly’s tricky relationship with her mother: ‘In *Maman’s* defence, it has to be said that Somaly thinks she can sense a hint of underlying goodwill in that cool and reserved look, as if Somaly is some kind of natural resource, as yet unrefined. Or rather, perhaps, a domestic animal that can be trained. *In any case, someone something can be done with*’ (252, emphasis in original).

Book reviews: *Song for an approaching storm* by Peter Fröberg Idling. Patrick Allington. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Song for an approaching storm does not have a thin plot: the intrigue of a love triangle plays out before a backdrop of politics, emerging radicalism and the blunt assertion of power. Nonetheless, the novel's characterisations drive the story's momentum and generate the most sustained interest. Idling has a wonderful eye for detail, and a deft way of imbuing a descriptive passage with weighty meaning without overburdening it or doing so too obviously. Although there are sections a little heavy on background or exposition (especially in Part 2), Idling generally strikes a reasonable balance between attempting to describe a complex web of official and subterranean politics without resorting to over-simplification or, alternatively, without allowing the novel to get bogged down in detail. In any case, some of the over-explanation, even when it arrests the story's momentum, is fascinating.

In the end, Part I of the book dominates because Idling's version of Sar mingles with the reader's awareness of the historical figure of Pol Pot — this mingling will occur even if, perhaps especially if, readers have a sketchy knowledge of the Pol Pot period. The portrait that results is notably unsettling: a love-struck young man who, a couple of decades after the events depicted in this novel, becomes one of the most reviled figures in history.

Patrick Allington